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CONSECRATING ONESELF AS A SANCTUARY

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We begin this *devar* Torah with a question that could be asked in the overwhelming majority of American Jewish congregations, but it would nonetheless be highly relevant to the disheartening experience of virtually all of them.

Why are so many Jews in our time rejecting Judaism and Jewish congregational life?

At least half of all Jews in the U.S. are not interested in congregational affiliation. Another quarter want only the most tenuous connection, seemingly just enough to maintain a residual ethnic identity for themselves and their children. Many come to synagogue no more than a couple of times a year, and often they pressure their children to go through what has little meaning to the parents and in turn becomes the basis for another generation's lifelong alienation from Judaism and congregational life.

What are the common models of liberal Jewish congregational life that are so widely rejected?

The most popular model is the synagogue as *religious agency.* It's typically an organization in which the production of benefits—whatever they may be, but rarely spiritually relevant to the pressures and hopes of day-to-day life—is largely in the hands of paid professional staff, and in which the vast majority of members are fairly described as passive consumers who contribute little or nothing beyond an annual "fee for services." The less common but more "romantic" model of organized Jewish religious life is the *chavurah* (fellowship). It's typically a small group of like-spirited souls that eschews the expense of professional rabbinic leadership and the discipline of formal religious education for themselves and their children.

The *parasha hashavua* (weekly Torah portion) Terumah, however, offers a very different picture of congregational life. Note that we didn't say a different kind of synagogue or temple, which connotes a building or place of meeting for a congregation, but congregational life. The distinction is pivotal, because contemporary Jewry for the most part has confused congregational means and ends.

The common misunderstanding is that the life of the congregation is the *means* to achieve the *end* of building a synagogue and school, and building up the membership that will attend and pay for them. But the opposite is the case: The construction and appropriate use of the synagogue building and school—with their facilities and furnishings—is to be the primary educational *means* to achieve the *end*, which is a spiritually inspired and inspiring congregational community. Thus it may be useful from a contemporary congregational point of view to consider more carefully our relationship with the modern synagogue sanctuary as a representation of the ancient Temple Sanctuary.

Parasha Terumah begins with God instructing Moses regarding the ways and means of building the Sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ). God says to Moses: "Speak to the Children of Israel and let them take for Me a portion; from every man whose heart motivates him, you shall take My portion." (Exodus 25:2) The Baal HaTurim (Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, 1280-1340) teaches us that Moses used the comforting tone, *dabeir el b'nei Yisrael* (דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל—"speak to the Children of Israel"), because the request entailed a contribution of money in the form of gold, silver, other precious metals, and other valuable goods. (Exodus 25:3-7) But the portion, what is referred to as *terumah*, is that which

the individual set aside for a sacred purpose, not simply the means for the construction of a facility.

The text says that the *Children of Israel*, corporately, is to take the gift for God—the Hebrew reads: *v'yikchu li terumah* (וְיִקְחוּ־לִי תְּרוּמָה). In other words, the gifts are not to be given to God directly, for God's immediate benefit (which would be nonsensical on the face of it), but given to the congregational community to be used, of course, to further God's purposes.

Although *terumah* is often translated as "gift," doing so misses its essence. The root of the word is ר-ו-ם, which means to raise something up for an exalted goal. It would be a mistake to think that what was being elevated was the material object that was contributed. In every instance the purpose was to use the meaning of that which was foregone as a symbolic impetus to "sacrificing"—read, subordinating—some aspect of oneself to God. Certainly the "sacrifice" was not made with any thought of manipulating or controlling God, but rather taking control of oneself in accord with God's law of moral spirituality. Ideally, what was being raised up or elevated here was Am Yisrael (the Jewish people).

Each of the portions to be given, in its own unique way, represented "moral purity and truth"—as if to say, I dedicate myself to observe God's demand for moral purity and truth. And each item, ultimately, had its source as a gift from God—as if to say, dedicating myself to observe God's demand for moral purity and truth is a small token of acknowledgment for all the gifts we have received, a token which reminds us of the Divine instruction to use those gifts successfully, thus fulfilling God's will in our upward moral-spiritual transformation.

The text tells us that Moses is to receive the *terumah* "from every man whose heart makes him willing." The Hebrew text reads: *mei'eit kol-ish asher yidvenu libow* (מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְּבֶנּוּ לִבּוֹ). The key word is *yidvenu* (יִדְּבֶנּוּ), from the root נ-ד-ב, which means to associate oneself with something freely, voluntarily. Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) notes that these freely given contributions reflected a reciprocal kindness, comparable to God's kindness in creating the universe and all its bounty.

Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340) teaches that, "The whole concept of the sanctuary has to be understood as an internalized version of what transpired during the revelation at Mount Sinai." The hallmark of the events at Sinai was *mattan Torah*, the giving and receiving of the Torah. Certainly, the ultimate purpose of every Jewish sanctuary was and is to ensure acceptance of and constant devotion to the Torah. And, certainly, there can be no other *defining* purpose when we assemble in our congregations today.

This understanding is crucial: the Sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ) does not *contain* holiness, but *creates* it—that is, its purpose is to promote the ideal of spiritual and moral perfection, which in turn is the underpinning of marriage, family, community, and peoplehood.

In this vein, Akeidat Yitzchak tells us that the Sanctuary is "purely symbolic"—that is, "it embodies ideas expressed symbolically." Ipso facto, then, its construction and all of the details of its furnishings and appurtenances also are symbolic, representing a curriculum designed for our moral spiritual learning. And, as Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744) points out, "… a person should not make a contribution until he was in the proper frame of mind" for such learning.

But what should we imagine the proper frame of mind to be?

Recalling that the Sanctuary was to be a symbolic edifice with the primary role of teaching how to live according to God's will, one who contributed voluntarily to its construction would, at the least, be prepared mentally and emotionally to learn its lessons energetically. And so, not surprisingly, Rabbeinu Bachya teaches that, "… Donating materials without the gift representing the right spirit"—what's necessary to merit the presence of the Shechinah—"will result in an empty Sanctuary, one in which the presence of God is not manifest."

In this *parasha* we are at the point in the Torah narrative when God tells Moses: "And they [the people] shall make a sanctuary for Me and I will dwell among them…." (Exodus 25:8) So we're aware that the purpose of this sanctuary is not for God to dwell *in* it. But rather, if we the people build it with the appropriate *kavanah* (intention), God will dwell *among* us.

The text reads: *V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham* (וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם)—"And they shall make a Sanctuary for Me and I will dwell among them"—but why should we Jews assume that the Shechinah, the palpable presence of God here on earth, is only to be with us in one or another physical sanctuary?

To the contrary, it's our understanding that the Shechinah is present among us throughout our private and public lives in direct proportion to our willingness to "sacrifice" (again, read subordinate) ourselves to the Jewish Covenant with God and the vision and path of Torah. Moreover, our history demonstrates that abandonment of the Covenant and Torah, more often than not, signals the destruction of our ancient and modern sanctuaries.

We refer to the ancient Sanctuary both as the Mikdash (מִקְדָּשׁ) and the Mishkan (מִשְׁכָּן). The roots of these appellations tell us much that we need to know to understand correctly the Sanctuary's role in our lives. *Mikdash* is from the root ק-ד-ש, mean-

ing to separate something, to set it aside for a special purpose, and to forgo other things that would obstruct that purpose—in effect, to make it holy. It reminds us that we have to separate ourselves, set ourselves aside for the special purpose of doing God's will, if we want to experience the Shechinah in our midst—not only in the synagogue on Shabbat, but potentially in every waking moment of our lives. *Mishkan* is from the root ש-כ-ן, meaning to dwell or reside with others, or simply to be present. *Mishkan* represents the place where God dwells, where God is present—*when* we dedicate ourselves to Torah's vision and path for our lives.

Our teacher, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), with his extraordinarily inspired spiritual insight, teaches us that it's certainly possible "… to make our own personal selves into a priestly consecrated Sanctuary of God." (Hirsch commentary on Deuteronomy 6:8)

So while the ancient Sanctuary in Jerusalem is a model for our own synagogue sanctuary, it is also a model for each of us individually. Each of us can separate and dedicate our life to upholding the covenant and Torah. Thus each of us can live our life as a sanctuary of God, combining the qualities of *mikdash* and *mishkan*, personally reenacting the events at Mount Sinai, and thereby passing on the Torah to others through our day-to-day values, attitudes, and behavior. In this way, each of us can promote the ideal of spiritual and moral perfection.

How are we to understand the relationship between the synagogue sanctuary and each of us individually becoming a sanctuary of God?

The common *misunderstanding* in contemporary Jewish congregational life is that the synagogue *contains* holiness. The idea seems to be that somehow the synagogue sanctuary is automatically holy—perhaps many people believe that to be the case because of the presence of a Sefer Torah—and when we place ourselves in the synagogue sanctuary, it's believed that we too become holy by some sort of spiritual osmosis.

But the synagogue sanctuary, like the ancient Temple Sanctuary, is only holy when we enter it having purposefully separated and dedicated ourselves to its teachings. The temple, whether the ancient one in Jerusalem or ours today, is not holy in and of itself, not even with the presence of the Sefer Torah. Without the Torah-driven intentions and actions of its disciples, it's only bricks and mortar, paper and parchment.

Consecrating oneself as a sanctuary, which each one of us can do as a member of a congregational community, is the precondition for the holiness of the temple sanctuary, then and now.

And each of us as a consecrated sanctuary is also the precondition to making congregational life sufficiently spiritually inspired and inspiring that the majority of our fellow Jews enthusiastically want to invest in it and reap its benefits for themselves.

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